

## Don't Let It Burn, Don't Let It Fade by Juxtaposie

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**Summary:**

*It wasn't supposed to be possible.*

*But then again, her life had been filled with impossibilities. Her whole existence was an impossibility, and when she thought about things that way it actually seemed much more possible; not just possible, but probable.*

El has a choice to make.

For the Mileven Week prompt Nov. 7th, Fate

## Don't Let It Burn, Don't Let It Fade

### Author's Note:

Hey, I'm not dead! I did go to rehab though, if anyone was wondering why For The Unknown hasn't been updated in forever. Don't worry guys; there's lots of stuff coming.

As always, I couldn't have done any of this without Artemisrae, the imp on my shoulder who's constantly chanting "write!" when I should be doing anything else.

It wasn't supposed to be possible.

But then again, her life had been filled with impossibilities. Her whole *existence* was an impossibility, and when she thought about things that way it actually seemed much more possible; not just possible, but probable.

Because sitting in the doctor's office at 17, the doctor had said, "almost impossible."

*"You're perfectly healthy, but conceiving on your own is going to be almost impossible."*

It had never bothered her. She wasn't even sure she wanted kids, and when she and Mike had talked about it the spring before their wedding their decision had been to make no decision at all; they were still so young (only twenty-two, that June they'd gotten married) and there was plenty of time to make up their minds.

Being married was pure bliss. Their wedding had been a small outdoor affair in the Wheeler's backyard. They'd honeymooned on Lake Michigan at a little bed and breakfast full of antique armoires and lace doilies, and then two months later they'd relocated to Boston so Mike could go to grad school. Their tiny, one-bedroom apartment in Quincy was one half of the upstairs of an old wooden house, too warm in the summer and poorly insulated against the

cold, wet New England winters, but the ceilings were high, and the windows were many, and the pale yellow floral wallpaper was endearing in a dated way that reminded the both of them of the Byers' house. The appliances were ancient, the toilet backed up when it rained too much, and more than once Mike had fallen down the dangerously narrow back steps when it iced - but neither of them would have traded their life together for anything more grand. Even after Mike had graduated they'd decided to stay in Boston for a few more years. He'd been offered an R and D job that paid well and opened doors, and El had finally decided she was ready for higher education. She was about to start her final year on a mathematics degree at Northeastern. When she was done with school, they'd talk about relocating.

The only thing set in stone was their marriage. Everything else was mutable, and they both liked that - El especially, after the gray stagnancy of her childhood in the lab. Their lease was only a year long, and they'd renew it until they didn't. They both wanted to move, back home for awhile, then to someplace new, maybe someplace warmer. Max had gone back to California, and El had loved it when she'd visited. Mike's grandparents lived in Arizona, and the desert was hot and bright, beautiful in a wild, barren sort of way that made her think of John Wayne movies, and watching Lonesome Dove with Hop. There were mountains in Utah, and beaches in Florida, and vast stretches of national parks all across the country - and that was just the States. The world was wide open, and she wanted to take in as much of it as she could, with Mike beside her.

All of that would be complicated by kids. *Almost impossible*, her traitorous brain supplied.

"Almost impossible," she echoed out loud, hugging her knees tighter against the flat plain of her belly. From her position on the floor, with her back against the couch, she could just see the winking light of the answering machine. Closing her eyes tight, she put her forehead on her folded arms, rewound the tape with the tiniest half-thought, and hit play again.

"Jane," a crisp, heavily-accented woman's voice chirped from the machine. "This is Dr. Wallach. Listen, sweetheart, I know you said you weren't trying, and it wasn't possible but your body had other

ideas. You're pregnant, maybe five or six weeks along. We can get you back in next week to talk about your options and make some referrals, so give us a call and get an appointment scheduled. Congratulations!"

She erased the message as angry tears pricked at her eyes, spilling over almost immediately. She felt so stupid. Stupid for not being more careful, stupid for not *knowing*. She caught every single stomach bug that got passed around, but what kind of stomach bug made you puke on and off for over a week, and gave you shooting pains with just as little regularity? Were the shooting pains *bad*? Were they normal? If they *were* bad, how worried should she be? Should she be worried at all? Was she going to go through with it and spend the next twenty years shackled to another human being she hadn't chosen and only had minimal control over?

Panic tightened around her chest like an iron band, until her breaths were coming in loud, shallow gasps and her head started to swim. Slumping sideways, she pressed her cheek to the cool floorboards and forced herself to count to five between each shuddering inhale and exhale. Nothing was set in stone. She and Mike could conquer anything together. She and Mike, together.

God, *Mike*.

After six days of vomiting after nearly every meal, intense headaches, and an overall feeling of not-rightness, he'd finally insisted she see a doctor - a thing she'd managed to avoid in the five years they'd been in Boston. It had been his worry that finally convinced her, but as badly as she wanted him home with her now, to fuss over her and fetch her tea and sit with her, she was grateful he was at work. Panic rose in her again as she thought of having to tell him how badly she'd fucked up, what a colossal mistake she'd made all those years ago when she'd told him it was fine, and not to worry, nothing would happen. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

What if he got mad at her? What if he was *happy*?

Waffling between which reaction would be worse, she started sobbing.

*Breathe*, she told herself, hearing Mike's voice in her head. *Inhale, one, two, three, four, five, exhale, one, two...*

And for a long time that was all she could do.

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It was dark when she woke, disoriented by her surroundings and wondering what had happened, but then she registered the hand on her hip and when she turned her head Mike was gazing down at her with thinly veiled concern. For a long moment things seemed hazy and her gaze wandered around the room, trying to place herself.

"You were asleep on the living room floor," Mike offered gently. The hand on her hip slid around to the small of her back, and her focus sharpened. The living room floor. Dr. Wallach's message and her subsequent meltdown.

Tears gathered in her eyes again as she reached for Mike, both hands landing on his shoulders, and he responded exactly as she'd known he would, wrapping his arms around her waist, shuffling around to sit before hauling her into his lap. One long arm circled her shoulders, holding her tight against him while he rubbed soothing circles into her back.

It wasn't the first time he'd found her asleep somewhere strange, or even awake and completely unresponsive. It happened sometimes, when she had bad days, when something reminded her too much of the lab or when her nightmares were too real. It had happened less and less as time had marched on, helped along by therapy and medication, but it was still a common enough occurrence that he didn't seem too upset by it. Once he'd understood what was happening he'd been surprisingly good at helping her cope. Time had soothed his temper a little, and now instead of misplaced, frustrated anger there was only loving concern.

"You wanna tell me what happened?" he asked when her breathing had returned to something more normal.

El, with her face buried in his neck, shook her head. She didn't want to tell him. She knew she had to, knew she should, but there was no

possible way she could make her voice work to say the words. She wasn't ready for it to be real.

*It's real*, her mind inserted unhelpfully.

Squeezing him tighter, she inhaled the familiar scents of aftershave and laundry detergent and willed her heart to settle. She was safe here, with him. Whatever happened he would be right beside her.

Then, as if set on some terrible cue, her stomach roiled. Bile choked the back of her throat as she untangled herself from Mike, scrambling to her feet and dashing into the kitchen to vomit noisily into the sink, all over that morning's breakfast dishes. At least her hair had been in a ponytail.

A dish towel appeared in the air beside her elbow, but before she could grab it her stomach turned and she bent back over the sink to bring up the rest of her lunch. By the time she was done she was sweating, her eyes and nose were streaming, her stomach hurt from heaving, and her back hurt from crouching. Her head hurt from crying, her heart hurt from *everything*, and so when Mike laid his arm gently across her shoulders she turned into him, pressed her damp, vomit-speckled face against his dress shirt, and sobbed.

"Hey," he soothed. "Hey, it's okay. Come on, come here."

Taking one of her hands, he led her back through the living room and into their bedroom. The blinds and windows were open in a vain attempt to catch some of the elusive late-summer breeze, and the fan was on so the air was a little cooler. The street lamps outside had bathed the room in a soft orange light, and Mike didn't bother to flip the light switch as he urged her down onto the edge of the bed. Smoothing the flyaways off her face, he pressed a kiss into her hair and said, "Hold on a second," before leaving the room.

She watched as light from the bathroom spilled across the floor, crying quietly as she clenched and unclenched her fists, right, left, right, and left, letting the rhythm soothe her, and by the time Mike returned she had mostly calmed.

"Okay," he said, dropping to one knee in front her and setting a few

things down beside him. "Arms up."

El complied and he stripped off her t-shirt, tossing it in the direction of the laundry basket. "Washcloth," he said, pressing something warm and wet into her clenched, trembling hands. Smiling gratefully at him, she wiped her mouth and chin before passing the washcloth over the back of neck, where the ends of her ponytail were sticking to the sweat that had gathered there. Next Mike passed her her toothbrush, with a little dollop of toothpaste on the bristles, and a glass of water. He stripped off his work clothes while she brushed her teeth, her eyes tracking his movement around the room, and when he'd changed he came and sat down beside her. She rinsed and spat with the glass of water and handed it back to Mike, who put it down with the washcloth, on the bedside table.

"Thank you," she said, her voice quiet and watery.

Lacing their fingers together, Mike raised their clasped hands to press a kiss to the back of her palm. "Anytime," he answered easily. "Still got that stomach bug, huh? What'd the doctor say?"

Panic clawed at her again, and El took a deep breath, squeezing Mike's hand as another tear rolled down her cheek.

"That bad?" he joked gently, bumping her shoulder with his.

"Well," she said, swallowing around the bile that wanted to rise. "It's not a stomach bug."

His hand tightened around hers. "No? What's the diagnosis then?"

El swallowed again, her breath shuddering on the exhale as she tried to calm herself.

Mike dropped her hand so he could wrap an arm around her, pulling her tightly against his side. Silence blanketed the both of them until he finally said, "You're scaring me, El. What's wrong?"

And again, she didn't know what to say. She felt betrayed, in some weird way; a stranger in her own body, with no control over her thoughts or feelings. Claspng a hand over her mouth helped muffle the words she didn't want to say but couldn't stop. "I can't," she

choked, whispering. "I can't, I'm sorry, I don't - I don't know what to say, I can't *think*, I just need - time, I need--"

"Breathe," Mike broke in gently. "Take all the time you need and just breathe."

Sighing gratefully, El tipped the both of them backwards to lay down across the bed. Mike gave her space, not touching her but for his shoulder pillowing her head and her arm laying against his side. He let his breathing settle into a deep, slow pattern, and she did her best to match him. The fan whirred lazily above them, and El pressed the heel of palm against her stomach, fingers splaying beneath her navel. *Almost impossible.*

It took an embarrassingly long time for her to feel like she could speak again. Every time she tried the words got jumbled in her mouth, her whole body rebelling against the unseen invasion. Saying it would make it real.

*It's real*, her mind supplied again, just as it had earlier. *Real, real, real...*

She finally settled on, "I'm sorry." Mike tensed beside. "I need some time. I don't know how I feel."

"Whatever you need," he said softly. Rolling onto his side, he kissed first her temple, then her cheek and the tip of her nose, and finally her mouth, his lips warm and soft against her own. She sighed again, feeling a little of the tension leave her body as he cupped her cheek in one large palm, pressing another gentle, if slightly more insistent kiss to her parted lips before pulling away. "Think you could keep some soup down? I can call Fat Cat, see what the soup of the day is."

She sniffled, and wiped at the dampness on her cheeks. "Okay," she said miserably. Cupping his face in her wet hands she kissed him one more time, her body curling toward his, before she let him go.

In a stroke of good luck the soup of the day turned out to be chicken noodle, which sounded palatable if not necessarily good, so Mike called in a to-go order (soup for her, a burger and fries for him), and then shuffled into a pair of flip-flops to go pick it up.



He called a perfunctory, "Be back in a few," and El listened as he locked the back door behind himself, but no sooner had the tumbler turned than she was flying up off the bed, grabbing the first shirt she could find in her side of the dresser, and following him out of the apartment, not even bothering with shoes as she relocked the door. She dashed down the stairs in bare feet, and climbed into the passenger side of the cab just as he went to put the keys in the ignition.

"Gah!" he exclaimed, dropping the keys into the footwell and pressing one palm over his heart like a little old lady. "Jesus, you scared the shit out of me. What are you doing?"

"I don't want to be alone," she said. When she finally looked at him his eyebrows were drawn down, his jaw clenched as if holding back the words El knew he wanted to say. She could feel his concern ramping up, like a shark that smelled blood, but he'd said she could have time, and he made good on the unspoken promise.

"Well buckle in then," he said as he fished around his feet for the keys. "You can pick a CD."

The evening was warm, but there was a good breeze going, so they rolled the windows down and El turned the Cranberries up. Mike reached for her hand across the center console, holding onto her loosely in case she wanted to pull away, but El wrapped her fingers tightly around his palm, breathed in the humid summer air, and for just a little while she felt all right.

They'd picked up their food and were just about to turn down their street when El put her hand on Mike's arm and said, "Let's eat by the water."

"That sounds nice," Mike agreed, "but someone forgot to put shoes on."

"Sand is soft," she protested.

"Parking lot is full of glass and gravel," he countered.

She had to agree that it was a nasty parking lot, but there was a

simple solution to that particular problem. "Piggyback ride?"

"You just expect me to carry you when you don't wanna wear shoes, is that it?" he teased, even as he flipped the blinker from left to right. He laughed when she nodded. "You're so spoiled."

Smiling, she leaned her head back against the headrest, closing her eyes as the wind swept through the car. "Whose fault is that?"

"Goddamnit," he swore, laughing again. "Mine, I guess."

"Bingo."

So Mike piggybacked her across the parking lot, and they sat in the damp sand and ate their dinner, and when they finally got home the feeling of being all right stuck around while they watched TV and got ready for bed. The soup, mercifully, stayed down. They didn't talk much, and El relished the comfortable silence even if she could tell Mike was holding his tongue.

It wasn't until they were laying in bed, spooned together sharing one pillow, that he finally broke.

"Hey, um," he started, breaking the quiet of their bedroom. "I - I know I said you could have time, and you can, as much as you need, but..." The arm around her waist tightened a little, his fingertips pressing into her ribs. "Please tell me you're not dying. Or god, don't, if you are, I don't know, I just- my mind jumped to the worst-case scenario, so please, please, if it's bad just - just rip the bandaid off."

El wanted to laugh. Of course that was where his mind had gone. "Mike," she soothed, reaching back behind the both of them to thread her fingers through his hair, which had started to curl with the humidity. "It's okay."

His voice was soft and childlike, vulnerable in a way she hadn't heard in a long time when he asked, "You're not dying?"

"I'm not dying," she said.

He'd been holding his breath, and his exhale stirred the loose curls that had fought free of her ponytail. His arm tightened again and

didn't slacken as he buried his face in the side of her neck, pressing an open-mouthed kiss to the skin there. "Oh thank god," he murmured. "I thought I was gonna puke."

Turning in his embrace, El wrapped her arms around his shoulders and hooked a leg over his hip, pulling him as close to her as she could. Mike clung to her, as if afraid she would disappear, and that was how they fell asleep.

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Morning dawned cloudy and drizzling, but by noon everything had burnt off and the day was hotter and more humid than ever. Mike had suggested she call into work, but the fall semester was drawing ever closer and the second-hand bookstore where she stocked shelves and helped frantic students locate texts had been bustling from open to close the last week, and that particular Thursday she was grateful for the work. Normally so much contact with strangers set her teeth on edge, but staying busy allowed her to ignore her problem - a terrible habit of which she was often guilty. She was helped along by her body finally cooperating; the nausea had abated, and she was able to keep down both breakfast and lunch, and it was 4:37 by the time she realized she was supposed to have left over an hour ago.

"Why didn't you tell me what time it was?" she demanded of Don, the bookstore's middle-aged owner, as she fished her purse out from under the register he was manning.

He shrugged. "You were under one of your magical spells. I didn't wanna interrupt."

She groaned unhappily. Another bad habit, that she could so easily work herself to exhaustion when she wanted to avoid something. Now Mike was going to beat her home, and he'd be worried when she wasn't there, and that was the absolute last thing she wanted, to remind him that he needed to worry about her. This time it was guilt, not nausea, turning her stomach as she half-jogged to the nearby BART station.

As if trying to make up for how easily her work day had gone, the rest of the evening was terrible. Mike kept his peace but the tension

rolling off of him was palpable, and only served to further sour her mood. She caught him watching her more than once, and the third time he had to tell her the pasta was boiling over (while she was standing right in front of it, staring at nothing with the wooden spoon motionless in her right hand) she turned the burner off, marched out of the kitchen, and threw herself down on their bed, trying not to cry.

Mike didn't follow her immediately, and she was grateful. The space gave her time to collect herself and allowed him to put a lid on his temper, which she knew had been climbing right along with his concern. He turned the radio on in her absence - NPR, by the sound of it, and she almost laughed at how grown-up it made him seem - and left her alone.

With nothing left to do, El forced her emotions down and confronted the problem the best way she knew how - with rational logic.

So she was pregnant, and in seven and a half months there would be a baby. They hadn't talked about it, not really, and they certainly hadn't planned for it. Their apartment was too small for three people, but they were in a good place financially. They were far away from family and friends, and she still had another two semesters of school left. If they had a baby now, there was a chance she'd have to postpone graduation. Mike worked long hours more often than not (a thing he loved and hated about research and development), so there was no telling how involved he'd be able to be. Hop and Joyce and the Wheelers - or Karen, at least - would almost certainly help them, with both money and time. And there would be a little person that she and Mike had created together and would be responsible for. The thought was as thrilling as it was terrifying.

She'd always been ambivalent about babies, but she loved children. Babies were sweet and simple, but at the end of the day they were just little bundles of need who could only communicate through crying. Children were explorers, discovering their world every day in new and increasingly complicated ways, and it was easy to follow that thought to a little boy with Mike's dark hair and her tanned skin, his sharp chin and her big, amber eyes. Or a girl with curly brown hair and pale skin dotted with freckles. The combinations were endless, and each one broke her heart in the sweetest way. Would they be quiet, like her, or duty-bound to fill each and every silence

with easy conversation? What other traits would they take? Mike's fierce protectiveness and driving need to right wrongs? Her stubbornness and dedication to remain kind despite the world's cruelty?

But there was fear too, sitting just beneath the excitement of limitless potential, not the least of which was her own skepticism at her ability to be a competent, loving caregiver. She could barely take care of herself some days - how would anyone ever trust her to take care of a child? How would Mike? They'd been together thirteen years, half of their lives, and though he'd never shown her anything but unwavering devotion she was still jealous with his love and attention. If there was a baby the focus would have to shift, and she wasn't sure how well she'd cope with no longer being the sole object of his affection. What else would come with being pregnant? The idea of sharing her body with another living thing almost made her skin crawl, and there would have to be doctor's appointments. She could handle the pain (too well, she knew), but what about the hospital stay? What would happen to her carefully augmented brain chemistry if she had to stop taking her medications? What if there were *complications*?

And deep down inside her there was a darker thought stirring. What if she passed on more than a button nose and brown hair? What if their baby was born with the same terrible abilities that had cursed her to a childhood of abuse and neglect? How could they keep that child safe? Would they even be able to?

Knowing what could happen, it felt wrong to want this at all - but part of her did want it. How much of her panic was a gut reaction to her perceived loss of control over her life, and how many of her fears were grounded in reality? And if everything was just bad timing, and her fear outweighed her want, would Mike be able to cope with that? It was hard to imagine his feelings for her would remain unchanged if they disagreed about the situation, but El believed through and through that she belonged to herself before she belonged to anybody else, and ultimately the choice would be hers. She would have willingly died for him, had killed for him time and again, but she wouldn't go through this just to make him happy.

*You have to talk to him*, she told herself. *Figure it out together.*

Then, as if summoned, Mike called her name from the doorway and when she lifted her head he was leaning against the door frame with both hands shoved in his pockets. His posture was defensive but not angry, and when El smiled at him he slumped a little, visibly relieved, and sat down on the edge of the bed beside her hip.

“Hey,” he said gently. “I was thinking...”

He paused and El waited, ready to talk if that was what he wanted but still unwilling to bring it up herself, and he surprised her by saying, “What if we played hookie tomorrow?”

She rolled onto her back to look at him and he leaned over her, his hands on the mattress on either side of her waist. “We haven’t been to the beach once and summer’s almost over. We can pack a lunch and drive out to White Horse and just take it easy, maybe grab some dinner on the way home if we’re hungry again. Whaddaya think?”

“I think,” El said slowly, wrapping her hands around his forearms. “I think I love you.”

A smile tipped one side of his mouth. “You *think*? We’ve been married five years and you *think* you love me?”

She refused to meet his gaze, playing coy. “I’m still making up my mind,” she said as she fiddled with the button on his collar.

“Would ditching work and taking you to the beach help you decide?” he asked, taking one of her hands in his.

She nodded. “Couldn’t hurt.”

“Well then it’s a date,” he said, and kissed her.

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Miraculously, Mike had managed not to get sunburned - and the rest of their little holiday had gone just as well. They’d gotten out of Boston a little after ten, and while there’d been plenty of people at White Horse Beach the weekend crowds hadn’t yet descended so they’d managed to find a pair of chairs and an umbrella. El had laid her beach towel out in the sun, and Mike had stuck to the shade, and

they'd sat quietly together for a long time, each enjoying the book they'd brought and the other's comfortable presence. After lunch, Mike had even managed to coax her out into the chilly water where she'd clung to him, laughing and pretending to be more afraid than she really was. She'd napped after that, sharing Mike's beach chair with her back pressed to his chest and his book resting on her legs, lulled to sleep by the warmth of his body and the salt-scented breeze on her face. They'd found a place that didn't care about Mike's damp swim trunks and El's coverup, and they'd had clam strips with fries and hush puppies for dinner before hitting the highway.

With her seat reclined and her bare feet hanging out the open window, it was easy to imagine a baby in the back seat - but then again that would have complicated their impromptu getaway. She sighed, and shifted around in the seat, suddenly restless. She was ready to talk, to lay everything out for Mike to examine, and when he had done his own thinking they would find a way to meet in the middle.

Confident in her understanding of her own feelings, El resolved to tell him when they got home

But Mike had other ideas, and from the way he kept glancing at her, biting back a smile, El thought she had a pretty good idea what they were. Her suspicions were confirmed when he pressed her against the back door, gripped her thighs in insistent hands, and hauled her off her feet. They kissed as he carried her down the hallway, laughing when he tripped on his flip-flop and almost dropped her, then her back hit the mattress and for a little while there was no space in her head for anything but Mike and the way he made her feel.

They laid together for a long time afterwards, talking and kissing softly as full dark came on, but finally Mike pulled away from her.

"I've gotta eat something," he said, laughing when his stomach growled right on cue.

El smiled up at him. "I told you you needed more food."

"I had plenty at dinner," Mike countered, ducking down to kiss her again, so quickly she had barely reacted before he was pulling away.

“We had the same thing,” she said, giggling. “You’re bigger than me. You need more food.”

Her laughter continued as he swooped down to kiss her again, then attempted to roll away from her and almost fell out of the bed. “I’m gonna make a grilled cheese,” he said, standing quickly and pretending he hadn’t just bashed one of his knees on the floor. “You want one?”

She shook her head, pressing her palms against the headboard as she stretched contentedly, grinning as his eyes tracked her movement. “Gonna shower.”

“Ooh,” he said thoughtfully. “Food or shower, food or shower. Naked wife or grilled cheese...”

“Grilled cheese,” El insisted when his stomach growled again.

“Grilled cheese,” he agreed with a sigh as he fished last night’s pajama pants out of the hamper. He pulled them on and kissed her one final time before ambling toward the kitchen, and El watched him until he was out of sight down the hallway. It took her a few minutes to work up the energy to leave the bed, sleepy and sated as she was, but a shower sounded like the perfect end to a virtually perfect day. It would help her gather her thoughts, and after Mike was done eating they could talk.

She made the water good and hot and took her time time with her routine, enjoying the feel of the water, the slide of the soap suds and the softness of her own skin. Her body had done amazing things, and it housed a very singular mind, but she still wasn’t sure if she wanted children to be one of those things.

But her all-encompassing fear had dissipated. She had no control over Mike, and no control over who their child might grow up to be, but she had control over her own thoughts and feelings, and she would keep control of her own body.

Feeling confident in herself and her choices she stepped out of the shower, and when she’d dried off and gotten dressed she made her way down the hallway and into the living room, still toweling her



hair dry.

That confidence shattered when she saw Mike. She expected him to be in the kitchen, standing at the stove, but instead he was sitting on the couch with his elbows on his knees, his hands folded in front of his mouth. He looked up when she entered the room, and she felt herself freeze, every thought brought to a grinding halt by the look on his face. Gone was the wide, happy smile he'd left the bedroom with, and in its place was a deep, angry frown. His face had gone pale, but there was a deep flush on his cheeks to match the redness that now rimmed his eyes.

The towel fell from her grasp as she rushed to close the distance between them. "Mike!" she exclaimed, her voice soft and concerned as she sat down beside him. "What happened? What's—" She reached for him, but when she put a hand on his arm he shrugged out from under her touch and stood to pace away from her.

"What's wrong?" she tried again, gripping the edge of the couch cushion beneath her knees as she watched him, wondering why he wouldn't look at her again.

Everything in her froze when his response was to press the rewind button on the tape in the answering machine, and time slowed to a crawl when he pressed play.

"Good morning Mrs. Wheeler," a much too cheery voice said through the speaker. "This is Laurie with Dr. Wallach's office, just calling to make sure you got our first message. We still haven't heard from you and we'd really prefer to see you sooner rather than later. Nine months might seem like a long time, but that baby will be here before you know it! Give us a call back so we can get you in next week. Bye now!"

Mike stopped the tape, and tapped his knuckles against the table while El tried to remember how to breathe. Her brain had gone completely blank, and the silence stretched out between them like a living thing, forcing them apart.

"I'm sorry," she said reflexively, her voice barely above a whisper.

Mike nodded, biting at his bottom lip, but didn't reply as he leaned back against the living room wall and crossed his arms over his chest. Everything about him radiated anger, and he *still wouldn't look at her*.

El clenched her fingers in the fabric of the couch. "Say something? Please?"

Mike shook his head and pushed off the wall, stalking across the room.

"Mike?" she tried again, her voice cracking.

"No," he snapped. "I said you could have your time, so we're not doing this until you're ready."

She sat up straighter as her own temper started to rise. "You don't get to say that and be mad."

"Yeah I'm mad," he agreed as he planted both hands on his hips and finally turned to face her. "I'm fucking pissed. I'm sorry I can't turn that on and off for you."

"I wasn't trying to hurt you," she said, frowning. It was a testament to how mad he was, that he was taking it so personally - and El couldn't even blame him - but that didn't make it okay for him to talk to her like that.

A bitter laugh bubbled out of his mouth. "Well you fucked that one up. I'm pissed and I'm *hurt*, El. How could you keep this to yourself? For two damn days?"

"I don't know," she said, shaking her head and hating that it was the only answer she had; hating that he was swearing at her, hating that he was hurt, hating how afraid she still was, hating everything about the entire stupid situation - and hating herself most of all. "I didn't know what to think, or how I felt, and I had to know before I told you. I had to. Because..."

Mike was watching her when she looked up at him, and there was so much hurt hiding behind the anger in his eyes that she wanted to cry.

Taking a deep breath she said, "Because I don't know if I want to do

this, and I'm so scared you're not going to be okay with that."

"El," he breathed, and she could hear the anger draining out of him. A few moments later he sat down beside her on couch, close enough so she could feel the heat coming off him but not so close they were touching. "What made you feel like you couldn't tell me?"

"Nothing!" she said quickly. "I- I wanted to tell you, I did, but it's just... too big. It doesn't feel real."

"No it doesn't," he agreed. "Jesus. You're pregnant."

"I'm pregnant," she echoed with a humorless little laugh.

Silence enveloped them, broken only by the sounds of the outside world, and El watched as Mike's hand crept slowly across the couch until their pinkies were touching. She took the cue and looped her pinkie over his, and he turned his palm up so she could lace their fingers together.

Gathering her courage, El finally asked, "What are you thinking?"

"I think," Mike said slowly. "I think you need to be sure how you feel before I tell you what I'm thinking."

His hand tightened on hers, and she *knew*. "You want this."

He sighed, and nodded. "Yeah. I want this." Then his hand tightened again, and he tugged on her arm until she was facing him. Tucking her damp hair behind her ear he cupped her cheek and said, "But I don't want it more than I want you."

Then he pressed his forehead to hers, and El knew what she wanted.